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Buying groceries online: the influences of electronic service quality (eServQual) and situational factors

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Abstract

The advancement of the technology has changed the way people shop for products and services. Consumers in Malaysia, too, are now avid online shoppers just like the others. The main objectives of this study are to examine the state of online shopping adoption, particularly in the groceries product category and assessing the electronic service quality (eServQual) provided by online grocers and situational factors influential to the online grocery shoppers. Data was collected using online questionnaire sent to potential respondents through personalized electronic mails and online private messages. The findings indicate that the online grocery shopping adoption is still not catching up where Malaysian shoppers still do not have the affinity towards buying groceries online. It was also found that they have the core competencies in online business technology, but should outsource certain capabilities especially if to widen their service coverage, expanding into other markets beyond the major cities.

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Keywords: online shopping; online shopping adoption; online grocery shopping: electronic service quality; eServQual; situational factors

1. Introduction

Access to the Internet network has enabled people to enjoy richer digital lifestyle in the form of greater reach of social connectivity, entertainment, information, knowledge resources and of course, new opportunities for businesses (ICT Strategic Review, 2014/2015).

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To put into the context of this study, the emergence of Internet technology has created a new meaning for commerce, which is referred to as the electronic commerce or "e-commerce". Many researchers have defined e-commerce according to their own perspectives. All in all, generally the term e-commerce is defined as conducting economic activities using electronic connection (Paynter and Lim, 2001; Osman, Yin-Fah and Choo, 2010; Haque, Sadeghzadeh and Khatibi, 2011). While Gefen (2002) have provided a more detailed definition of e-commerce, that is utilizing the Internet and the World Wide Web (www) as the technological infrastructure to communicate, distribute and conduct information exchange that would consequently lead to the commercial transactions between Web vendors and consumers.

In the ICT Strategic Review 2010/11, online retailing or electronic retailing (e-tailing) is defined as the resale without transformation of new and used goods and products to individuals and general public for household use. From the perspective of marketers, the Internet provides new opportunities for them to leverage it as their marketing channel. While from the consumers' point of view, the Internet enables quick access to information, widens options of services offered, provides convenience to them and creates a portal to a world of shopping galore (Kurnia and Chien, 2003; Ghazali, Mutum and Mahbob, 2006; Jain and Jain, 2011).

The concept of online grocery shopping started in Malaysia in the mid-2000, pioneered by humble names like PasarBorong Online; SubangGrocer.com; CGdeMart.com and Citrasspicemart.com (Ghani et al., 2006; Md. Zaini, Ramli, Abd Ghani, Samsudin, Hamid, Jusoff, Ngali, Rahmat, Khalid and Musa, 2011). However, either the online grocers' business models are not intrigued or they are not making money, less is known about those companies' existence and performance. Euromonitor International in its latest report dated April 2014 has recorded 13.5 percent in the value growth of grocery category in 2013, while others; beauty and personal care (9.4 percent), consumer electronics and video games hardware (17.3 percent), apparel and footwear (23.7 percent), consumer healthcare (12.4 percent) and media products (10.5 percent).

Malaysian e-grocers such as redtick.com; presto.com, foodworld.com.my and doorstep.com; are among the current players in Malaysian online grocery business. For the time being, all of these online retailers deliver all year-round across the Klang Valley using a fleet of lorries and vans. This area was focused based on the fact that it has the highest percentage of people connected to the Internet and computer-savvy people in Malaysia (Singh, 2011). Presently, although there are few online grocery players in Malaysia, none is prominent as no online grocers register any significant sales performance in 2010 (Euromonitor International, 2011). However, April 2013 has marked the introduction of online retailing by Tesco Stores (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd. It was further reported that the local online grocery retailing is expected to continue to face challenging conditions in the short-term forecast period as players are now taking the wait-and-see approach, depending on the success of Tesco. Other reasons that limit the customers' willingness to shop online are; consumers still picked up products from physical stores where they could choose their preferred items and some of them believed that physical stores offer more promotions than the online shopping channel. Consequently, online grocery retailing appeals to mainly the young and tech-savvy consumers who enjoy the convenience of not having to rush to the shops to pick up their groceries after work. However, this will remain a complement to the country's grocery retailing landscape since online shopping for grocery items is still in an infancy stage in Malaysia (Euromonitor International, 2014).

1.1. Problem statement

An article published by Nielsen Company describes Malaysia as a relatively sophisticated Internet market, which is certainly one of the most advanced in the South-East Asian region. Malaysia is experiencing a promising growth in its Internet retailing landscape despite the expectation that Malaysians preference for shopping in bricks and mortar outlets to remain strong over the forecast period of 2010-2015 (Euromonitor International, 2011). Beyond 2015, this country might hold a better future for Internet retailing as there is the possibility that more Malaysian consumers will become familiar with Internet retailing and will start shopping online due to physical infrastructure such as PC ownership, broadband access, payment methods and reliable delivery systems are expected to be sufficiently developed (Euromonitor International, 2011). However, in the US, the failure of some online grocers there was said because no one realized the amount of education it would take to get customers to change their buying habits and shop online for groceries (Clay and Wolff, 2001). Yet, the biggest challenge for e-groceries business is to get more consumers to change their minds about buying groceries online (Singh, 2011). The local consumers are skeptical of the online groceries to be able to live up to their expectations especially when perishable items present a challenge to the online grocers in their attempts to signal product quality. Handling the selection and

delivery of perishable products also proved to be a complex logistical problem. This might explained why many consumers who are not shopping for groceries online do have online shopping experience with other product categories (Md. Zaini et al., 2011). In line with this, there is an inherent need to investigate consumers' adoption towards online grocery purchasing.

1.2. Objectives of the study

In concluding this study, there are several objectives that need to be achieved: (1) to examine the state of online grocery shopping adoption amongst Malaysian online shoppers; (2) to establish the relationship between electronic service quality and online grocery shopping adoption; (3) to test the relationship between situational factors and online grocery shopping adoption; and (4) to determine the most important dimension of electronic service quality that affect online grocery shopping adoption.

1.3. Literature review

In conceptualizing the basic service quality model, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) identified ten key determinants of service quality as perceived by the company: the consumer reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding/knowing the customer and tangibility. Subsequently, the ServQual scale by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) was reduced from ten determinants to five dimensions of service quality: (1) tangibles, (2) reliability, (3) responsiveness, (4) assurance, and (5) empathy (Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000). However, Parasuraman and Grewal (2000) reported that the definition and the importance of the five ServQual dimensions are different when customers interact with a web site rather than with service employees. In response to these findings, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Malhotra (2005) introduced two different scales for capturing electronic service quality. They are eServQual and e-RecS-QUAL. For the purpose of this study, eServQual is applied as this model contains four dimensions mostly determine customers first use behaviour of online shopping. The dimensions are; *efficiency*, *fulfilment*, *system availability* and *privacy*. *Efficiency* measure whether the website is simple and easy to use, structured properly, and requires a minimum of information to be input by the customer. One of the advantages of buying over the Internet is the ease of comparing information against other product/service offerings. As compared to physical retail shopping, the online channel intermediaries facilitate consumers on the information comparison for each product/service with just a click of the mouse (Peterson, Balasubramaniam and Bronnenberg, 1997). *Fulfilment* is applicable because they relate to what the company promises. It is the extent to which the site's promises about order delivery and item availability are fulfilled. The *availability of the system* also makes online shopping seems convenience, hence, be another reason for a lot of customers consider to shopping via the Internet (Riseley and Schehr, 2000). *Privacy* is a very critical importance when making transactions online. It is the degree to which the site is safe and protects customer information. Usually, the Web site will indicate that it is a secure Web site so that customers can give, for example, personal information such as identity card number, phone number or credit card details, without worrying about other people accessing this information.

Are eServQual really pulling customers to start adopting online grocery shopping? Or is it because the customers' situation itself that push them to seek some kind of grocery shopping alternatives? Therefore, in the next part, the study discusses about the situational factors and online grocery shopping adoption. Situational factors that influence consumer behaviour have been the area of interest of many researchers since Belk (1974; 1975) first reported on them (Gehrt and Yan, 2004). Belk (1975) had identified five specific situational variables that influence purchase behaviour namely "antecedent states", "physical surrounding", "temporal perspective", "social surroundings" and "task definition". However, these situational variables generally influence consumers' purchase behaviour in physical store. Nevertheless, he has contributed substantially to raising the consideration of situational factors into the arena of consumer research as many researches have adapted them in the specific context of consumers' purchase behaviour in online setting. But it is sensibly impossible for all five of the categories of situation enumerated by him to be utilized since only two or three factors are normally selected (Gehrt and Yan, 2004). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, only the most relevant are tested: "antecedent states", "temporal perspective" and "lifestyle changes" because what is important, is not whether all five dimensions are accounted for, rather, it is important that the most relevant factors are selected (Gehrt and Yan, 2004). *Antecedent states* are momentary moods such as pleasantness, fatigue and illness that immediately antecedent to the current consumer's

situation. The mood effect or the way the customer feels at a particular time affects what customer buys or does (Solomon, 2009). *Temporal perspective* is a dimension of situations which may be specified in term of time (Solomon, 2009) such as time pressure. Many respondents in research done by Hand et. al., 2009 described *lifestyle changes* have led them to start online grocery shopping.

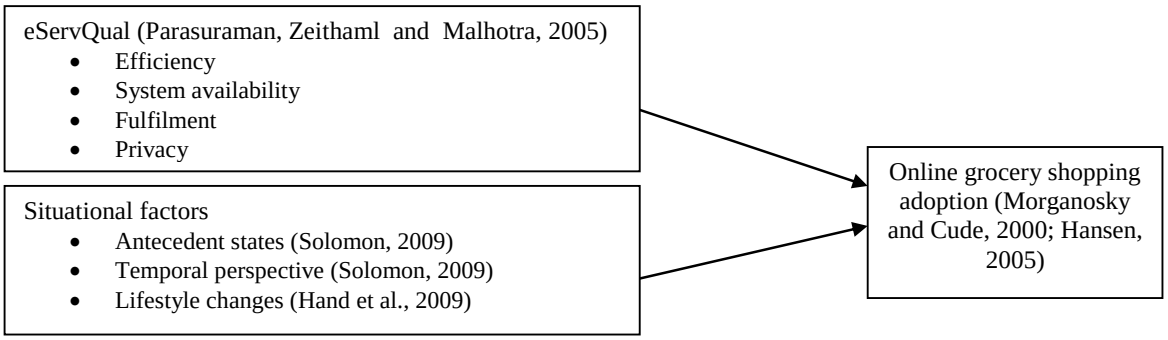

Figure 1: Relationship of eServQual elements and situational factors with online grocery shopping adoption

1.4. Research methodology

This study used correlation types of investigation where it wants to examine the relationship of eServQual and situational factors with online shopping adoption. The study was taken in a non-contrived setting where the study took place in a natural environment where the activities were in a normal manner. Researchers choose individual as the unit of analysis for this study where they treated each of the responses as an individual data source and the data was collected only once throughout the research period (cross-sectional studies). Further, several strategic analysis tools were employed to addressing issues in relation to the objectives of this study.

The target population for this research is online grocery users. 208 potential participants expressed their agreement to participate in the study by replying to the invitation e-mail and messages. For each of them, an e-mail detailing the URL of the questionnaire was then sent out. The questionnaire is divided into four parts which are Part A, Part B, Part C and Part D. Part A consists of five questions to examine overall customer's online grocery adoption. Next, twenty questions are imposed on Part B, which concentrates on the eServQual. Part C consists of fourteen questions on situational factors. Lastly, Part D is for the demographic profile questions. All of the questions are based on the previous studies, but modifications were made to suit with the objective of this study. As a whole, the questionnaire consists of 39 questions and all relevant responses to statements are indicated on a five-point Likert scale which represented by strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5).

2. Findings analysis

To examine the state of online grocery shopping adoption, five questions were imposed in the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) on the extent they agree with their state of online grocery shopping adoption. From Table 1, it could be seen that respondents' rate closely to neither agrees nor disagrees on all five items of online grocery shopping adoption. The average means for all elements fall in around 3.70 and none of the mean even reaches 4.00 to affirm a high state of their adoption. Generally, the adoption is still not that inclining and shoppers still do not have the affinity towards online grocery shopping.

Rank	Item	Mean
1	visit web to search and purchase grocery	3.86
2	to continue buying grocery using online	3.78
3	online shopping as alternative to traditional	3.71
4	online shopping is new way to shop	3.60
5	will not purchase through online anymore	3.58

Table 1. Means for online grocery shopping adoption

		Adoption	Efficiency	System Availability	Fulfilment	Privacy
Overall	Pearson Correlation	1	.594**	.759**	.600**	.584**
IMG	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	111	111	111	111	111

Table 2. The relationship of eServQual and online grocery shopping adoption

Table 2 displays all eServQual variables, *efficiency*, *system availability*, *fulfilment* and *privacy* have strong positive relationship with online grocery shopping adoption. In other words, in order for online grocery shopping adoption to increase, all eServQual variables need to be improved by online grocers.

		Adoption	Antecedent States	Temporal perspective	Lifestyle Changes
Overall	Pearson Correlation	1	.306	.275	.219
IMG	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.003	.021
	N	111	111	111	111

Table 3. The relationship of situational factors and online grocery shopping adoption

The above Table 3 depicts that, all situational factors variables, *antecedent states*, *temporal perspective* and *lifestyle changes* have positive relationship with online grocery shopping adoption. However, *antecedent states* is just moderately related to online grocery shopping adoption, whereas, *temporal states* and *lifestyle changes* are weakly related to online grocery shopping adoption. The analysis proves that the respondents found that none of the antecedent states, temporal perspective and lifestyle changes have strong influence on the adoption of online grocery shopping.

Model	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta		
(Constant)		-2.927	.004
Efficiency	.188	2.597	.011
System Availability	**.477**	6.277	.000
Fulfilment	.094	1.216	.227
Privacy	**.218**	3.237	.002

Table 4. Coefficients of the regression of eServQual with online grocery shopping adoption

Table 4 clearly describes that amongst all of the variables, the highest number in beta is on *system availability* which is significant at the .000 level. The significant result followed by *privacy* with significant at the .002 level. It may also be seen that only these two variables are significantly related to online grocery shopping adoption. Among the four eServQual variables, *system availability* is the strongest influence in the online grocery shopping adoption.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the promising growth in the area of online grocery retailing, there is still lack of understanding concerning the consumers' behavior towards this new way of purchasing groceries. This is mainly attributed to the fact that online grocery shopping is rather in an infancy stage in Malaysia's retail environment. However, shopping for groceries via the Internet has the potential to take its place as an alternative to traditional grocery shopping in the future, given that the online grocers know the reasons being behind the adopting behavior, they could take actions accordingly. Even though the last few years have seen the inception of online grocers in Malaysia, these research findings indicate that generally, the adoption is still not that inclining and shoppers still do not have the affinity

towards online grocery shopping. The finding goes in-line with a forecast report published by Euromonitor International (2011), which stated that the local online grocery retailing in Malaysia is expected to continue to face challenging conditions over the forecast period of 2010-2015.

All eServQual variables, efficiency, system availability, fulfilment and privacy have strong positive relationship with online grocery shopping adoption. All situational factors variables, antecedent states, temporal perspective and lifestyle change also have positive relationship with online grocery shopping adoption. However, antecedent states is just moderately related to online grocery shopping adoption, whereas, temporal states and lifestyle changes are weakly related to online grocery shopping adoption. Therefore, as compared to eServQual, situational factors are not strong reasons for Malaysian consumers to opt for online grocery shopping over purchasing groceries from the brick-and-mortar grocery outlets. In the initial stage it seems like busy working people are suitable with online grocery services but in this study it turns out that although most users are among educated and who have promising potential career, it shows that these people are not that busy and still can manage their time for grocery shopping. This could be also due to the fact that the business environment in Malaysia is culturally different with the western environment. In other words, in this country, chain grocery stores and mom-and-pop grocery stores are available almost at every corner of the land.

Among the four eServQual variables, system availability has the strongest influence on the online grocery shopping adoption followed by privacy. Therefore, if the online grocery shopping adoption is to be increased, the online grocers should find ways to enhance their system availability and privacy policy they currently offered. The findings tell us that system availability provided by online grocers defines customers adoption, that are to search and purchase grocery items through the Internet. Although the system is available at all times, users might get frustrated with the system when the system is somewhat not technically functioning. The fact that the online grocery site might fail to load its pages fast; slow page downloads (waiting for pages to open up), or uploads (waiting for page submissions to be uploaded to the site) or there is delay in completing online transactions, seems to be beyond the control of the online grocery operators. It is all depends on the users' computer best view ability, network and Internet connection coverage. Nevertheless, in order to maintain customer relationship, online grocers could support the system availability with hotline phone number or 24 hours 7 days a week automated customer care email to provide more prompt interaction with customers whenever they face Internet connection problem. When online grocers offer any interactive tools to enhance customer relationship and maintain customer loyalty, such tools may increase the convenience experienced by customers while shopping online and, therefore, there is a high possibility that they will return to the same site for the next purchase. The Government of Malaysia is in its effort of introducing more affordable high speed Internet access to boost the online retail industry in the year of 2010-2015. The proposed broadband network connection is expected to perform up to 40 times faster than the standard dial-up connection (Euromonitor International, 2011). This means in the near future, Internet users in Malaysia can enjoy sending and receiving vast amounts of data and information faster than ever before. And as the growth of Internet infrastructure in Malaysia continues, people will begin to change and fears will begin to fade as they gain familiarity to the new way of shopping via the Internet. As for experienced online shoppers, they can shop without having to worry about any problem caused by bad Internet connection. This too will intensify the rate of online grocery shopping adoption.

Although this study is limited by the methodology and samples used, it can serve as a basis for future exploration. It is hoped that this study would benefit food product retailers, particularly e-grocers and those that are planning to venture into this new retail format in future. All in all, it is hope that the finding of this study would benefit them on understanding the consumer needs in turn will help them to position their services and be more competitive in this rapid growing of food retail industry. Future study may also addresses aspects of marketing strategy, promotional and communication issues to acquire new users, and therefore could have a better understanding on the customers' adoption and disadoption of online grocery shopping.

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